

Methodological and ethical aspects of measuring improvement in professional development efforts

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In terms of acquiring knowledge of the impact of a professional development effort, we need to decide on the best way to measure whether the professional development produces the outcomes we seek, and to consider pressing dilemmas in terms of methodology and ethics in the measurement process. Although prior research has shown that focusing the measurement on core features of PD (e.g. content focus, active learning, coherence) as an important avenue for measuring PD outcomes (Desimone, 2009), we still struggle with making a clear connection between PD interventions and the desired outcome in terms of teacher learning and student achievement, largely due to challenges in methodology and ethics.

Over the last decades, video has become a very popular resource not only for the documentation of practices in classrooms, but also for systematic attempts to improve the ways teachers systematically reflect upon teaching – and ultimately how they actually teach (van Es, Tekkumru-Kisa et al. 2019). In other words, video has made its way into the field of professional development – and today it is considered one of the most powerful tools available to make teachers reflect upon, and change the way they enact teaching (Körkkö et al. 2019; Baecher 2020; Brouwer 2022). Conjoint with the use of video, the use of observation manuals in professional development has shown to contribute to positive structures for professional community and development and to enhance individual and collective learning

(Evertsen et al., 2022). Observation manuals can be helpful as they can contribute to a shared and explicit understanding of teaching (Klette & Blikstad-Balas, 2017; Klette, 2023). As pointed out by Hill and Grossman (2013), if teacher observation instruments are to support teachers in improving instructional practice, they must provide information that is both accurate and useful for teachers. Thus, what kind of manual we choose and how we make use of this to provide feedback to teachers involve both ethical and methodological considerations.

In this paper, we will discuss some of the ethical and methodological problems associated with video-based PD, especially PD drawing on observation manuals aiming to measure specific teaching practices. Ethically, we will concentrate on the problems of recruiting participants into programs requiring high fidelity – and how the ideal of pre-test and post-test may threaten the ideal of informed consent at all stages of the process. Further, we will discuss the ethical aspects of recording teachers in vulnerable situations, when trying out new things and attempting to take up target practices. Methodologically, we will discuss the factors making it difficult to “measure improvement” when using multiple observation scores, the difficulties in knowing how sustainable the measured progress (if any) actually is, as well as the distinction between measuring teacher improvement and measuring improvement in student achievement.